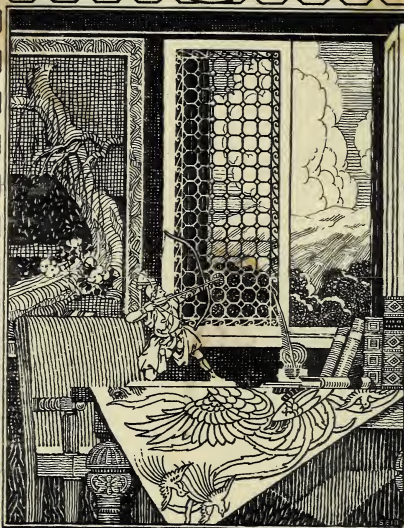


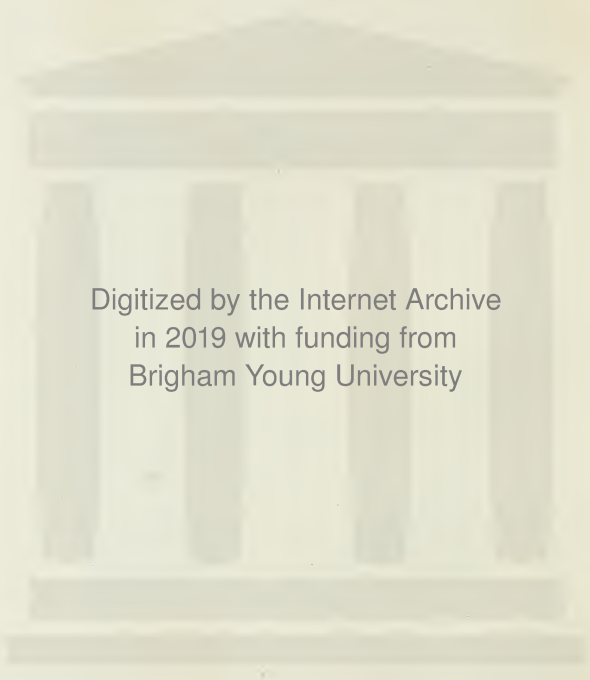


BARDS OF PASSION
AND OF MIRTH,

YE HAVE LEFT YOUR
SOULS ON EARTH!



CHARLES MACA.WILLCOX



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Parnassians Personally Encountered

By **EDGAR SALTUS**



**THE TORCH PRESS
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PARNASSIANS PERSONALLY ENCOUNTERED

In Paris there was a street that extended on from the Arc toward Passy. I have forgotten the name, and it is too much bother to look it up. For convenience, let me call it the Avenue Chose. Midway there are — or were — half a dozen apricot houses of the type known as English basement. At one of those houses an emperor used to look in on an effulgence. The emperor was Pedro of Alcantara and Brazil. The effulgence was Victor Hugo. Dom Pedro, very decent as emperors went, was a scholar and a gentleman. Victor Hugo radiated the glare of genius at its apogee. Already I had been sunstruck by him. Gautier said that when ad-

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mitted to the presence he nearly fainted. That I should enter there I no more dared to dream than of genuflecting to the Dalai Lama. But the possibilities of life, and particularly of youth, are inscrutable. A potent nonentity viséed my passport to the realm of light. Whether I prostrated myself before the august being I have forgotten. Probably I did not. But I remember rehearsing beforehand the Byzantine formula: "May I speak and live?" Very unnecessarily, too. The being was human and even commonplace. From a great chair that resembled a shrine and in which he looked precisely like an old idol, he deigned to ask about my *état d'âme*. "Very shaky," I might have replied, and afterward regretted that I had not. But the audience was at an end, and I descended the heights with, I am sure, rays about my brow.

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Presently the municipality took the Avenue Chose back to the font and re-baptised it Avenue Victor Hugo. At the first rumor of it angered hierophants hastened to the Master. "But this is ridiculous! The city itself ought to be re-named. Paris should be Hugoville!"

Serene and vatic the Master gestured: "Ca viendra" — That will come.

The modesty of the elect is a lesson to us all. Yet even that modesty was exceeded. At the Master's funeral, at which all Paris assisted, all the world too, a funeral that extended from one end of Hugoville to the other, the body of the being was, by his own direction, borne in a beggar's hearse. It was said that in that antithesis apotheosis had been staged.

Well, why not? Augier called the rites a coronation. The term seems a bit heavy. Apotheosis is perhaps more

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exact, though not to critics. Literary people do not care for Hugo. But to the simple, there are guitars in his verse, there are sequins, opals, rainbows, joy — joy that there can be verse like his!

In the procession, I encountered Stuart Merrill, a very youthful poet, engagingly pyrrhonian — on heavy subjects he expressed light views — whose own funeral occurred at Versailles during the scarlet August when Germany's jehad began.

Born with a gold pen in his mouth, his verse, always in French, might have led him into the Académie had he not been an American, or more exactly, a New Yorker. Through his indulgence, I subsequently obtained the unmerited privilege of exchanging the time of day with Leconte de Lisle.

On earth, Leconte de Lisle was pontiff of a flock of poets of whom quotable

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singers were Sully Prudhomme and François Coppée. The verse of Sully Prudhomme seemed to me calm and empty; the verse of François Coppée calm and inane. But the verse of Leconte de Lisle, calm also, marmorean for that matter, I read on my knees. Yet some of it educated France detested. For the purposes of the baccalauréat, some of it had to be put in Latin. In Latin! It is said that the devas converse in colors. It is in their tongue only that the *Poéms Antiques* could adequately be put.

It was those poems that I read on my knees. When by the grace of the gods and Stuart Merrill I was permitted to behold and even to address the Olympian, I said as much, and added: "You are a church, you have your worshipers."

The high muse wears a radiant pepulum. Praise or blame cannot reach the

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souls she haunts. Leconte de Lisle, who had the apostolic appearance of a head-waiter and who, in private life, was a public librarian, listened, or appeared to listen, with an indifference that was boreal.

This attitude, I understood, was habitual. I understood also that, by some, it was attributed to pride and objected to accordingly. But, as you may have noticed, people who object to pride never have anything to be proud of.

It was in a beer-hall that he was good enough to receive me. The accessories were not perhaps very dignified. Yet if, as one may suppose, a poet's superiority consists in the quality of his relations with the infinite, the qualities displayed in the *Poéms Antiques* are sufficient to have made him refulgent in a sewer.

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On saluting him, I thought of Joaquin Miller whose pleasant ghost dwells now, I like to think, in some wigwam on the Parnassian slopes. At school I had been vilely fatigued by bores that have survived only because Death has ignored them, and there the *Songs of the Sierras* were myrrh and cassia to my adolescent heart. Their note, occasionally a bit Byronic, but otherwise new, seemed to me splendid, and the legend of the minstrel, fighting Indians and the prairie fire while finding and fashioning his numbers, superb. The idea of meeting the poet-scout never entered my head. Unexpectedly that honor was mine. At the New York Hotel — a Broadway inn long since demolished — an acquaintance presented me. Immediately I recited a verse from the *Songs* and ventured to tell him that it was the finest thing

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in the English language. He was good enough to agree with me.

Subsequently, in Paris, I said the same thing to Owen Meredith, but in New York, meanwhile, I had omitted to say it to a florid troubadour with an anxious manner who, for better commerce with the muse, maintained a separate and private establishment in Tompkins Square. Why Tompkins Square I cannot say. I do not even know where it is. For which reason I once wrote a story about it and, on the proceeds, thought of going there in a cab. Each mortal has his Carassonne. But there each day the troubadour went. In silence he came and in silence departed, until the neighbors, thinking him a counterfeiter, called the police — to whom ragingly he unmasked himself. "I am Edgar Fawcett, author of 'Et cetera and Soforth'."

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Pausing, he fumed. It takes a poet to concoct a horrible revenge. Then at once he had it, and threateningly he resumed: "I will read you my last poem." He turned for that weapon. He turned again. Terrified, the police had fled.

Later, in Paris, I was witless enough to repeat to Owen Meredith the unoriginal remark that I had made to Joaquin Miller. Previously viceroy of India — the proper post for a poet — he was then ambassador to France.

He had been appointed viceory by Disraeli, for a reason very honorable and equally rare. Bulwer Lytton — Owen Meredith's father — was of some slight service to Disraeli before the latter had time to become prime minister and when he lived in a state of siege, barricaded from bailiffs and duns. It was in gratitude for the service that

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the post was given to Bulwer's son. He was said to be unsuited for it, but that is nonsense. A poet who cannot be viceroy has mistaken his vocation, and Owen Meredith had not mistaken his. He was a poet, minor certainly, and, it may be too, a poet for minors, but the wings of the muse were about him. They fanned his verse into flames, thin, perhaps, but clear.

It is a long time ago that I had the honor of meeting him and, on the encephalic film that I retain, his picture has become a blur. In the blur is a face less Parnassian than pleasant, a jovial face framed in abundant hair. Beneath is a Victorian adornment, a watch-chain circling the neck and swinging glitteringly and voluminously down to a pocket on an ample waist. The waist evokes the hero of gastronomy

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that the bard of "books" and "cooks" had become.

We had been having dinner with an English woman in whose Florentine villa Mrs. Oscar Wilde afterward went to die. In the course of the dinner she gave the poet a novel and asked him to translate the epigraph, which was in Greek.

He looked at it and said: "My eyes are not what they were, give it to our young friend."

But the passage that stumped him stumped me and I said: "It is not fit to be translated."

"Arcades ambo — Rogues both of us," he laughed and exclaimed. Then it was, and merely for the diversion, that I recited a verse of his and added that witless remark.

Afterward I mentioned the incident

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to Fawcett who looked extremely uncomfortable. For a moment I did not understand, then, almost at once, I did. I had omitted to say the same thing to him. The omission repaired, he thanked me with that gravity which, even in serious matters, he usually displayed.

Usually, but not always. The sight of a rejected manuscript was super-sufficient to make him turn his apartment into a bestiarium of words that roared. "I will not wear that coat," I once, through closed doors, heard him shout at his servant. "I tell you I will not wear that coat!" He paused, possibly for breath, then in the tone of an assassin hissed: "Very good, I will wear it; and if I catch cold it will be your fault." At that, the doors were thrown open and the portrait, on foot, of an English beefeater appeared. "And how," I soothingly inquired, "is the

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Master?" "I am starving!" he flung at me. "So-and-So has returned my poem. Were the varlet here, I would take my battle-axe and I would kill him."

All of which was purely poetry. Fawcett had no battle-axe. Even otherwise, he would not have harmed a fly. Moreover, the next day or the day after I met him on Fifth Avenue. He was arm and arm with that varlet. I knew what happened. He had written something that pleased him. Fawcett kept an account book, alphabetically arranged. If you offended him, in it you went with bad marks after you. If he wrote anything that he particularly liked, he rose from the table, bowed to himself in the mirror, and granted a general amnesty. The varlet had profited by some such remission.

"Non omnis moriar" — I shall not

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wholly die — he remarked to that mirror and to me and so remarked not because he habitually talked in Latin, but because like Horace, who said it before or behind him, he believed his verse would live. In that, I think he erred, and I think too it is a confounded shame. He was a real poet. But sensitive! Some sheet or other pitched into a book of his, and any criticism not written with the hat off gave him an attack of indignation morbus. Then and there he wrote and told the editor what he thought of him. To argue with a newspaper is like talking metaphysics to a bull. The first thing you know you get a horn in the midriff. That letter of his, published in full, was headlined: *The Worm Turns*. The amount of poison that a minim of printer's ink can contain for the un-

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philosophic, merits an essay. Fawcett took to his bed.

A contemporary was Frank Saltus. Cabanel painted his portrait. It shows a young man with a face smeared with cold cream — not the young man's cold cream but the cream of the pastry-cook that Cabanel was. Fawcett could scribble a song, as poet should, in no time. But what he scribbled he re-wrote, wrote again. It should have saved him. On one occasion, in less than an hour, Frank Saltus scribbled a ballad to Patti in four languages and put it to music. His facility was frightful and, as he never revised, it was fatal.

Like Fawcett, he too missed it. He missed it because he had perhaps a fibre too many, as Fawcett missed it because, it may be, he had a fibre too few. To

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contemporary critics both were minor violins in the great orchestra of letters. But at least they were in the orchestra. That they are not there now must be quite immaterial to them. Yet, everything being possible, when they return here one or the other may hold the baton.

Meanwhile there were relaxations. Fawcett, after the manner of poets, rather fancied himself, and Frank Saltus used to write him letters that purported to come from passionate young heiresses feverishly in love with the bard. These letters, to my great delight, he always read to us — like a gentleman, though, in strictest confidence — yet with an air, dear me! of what complacent satisfaction! Though he may know now that the bacchantes were myths, he did not then. To the day of his death he believed in them. To the

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day of his death he used to say, "I too have dwelled in Arcady." Now probably he knows. In his rocking-chair on Parnassus probably too he forgives. He had a big head but always a bigger heart.

Subsequently, in Paris, a revolution occurred. Against Hugo's deluge of splendors and the marmorean calm of Leconte de Lisle, the Symbolistes revolted. Symbolism in literature is what bolshevism has become in life, a form of hydrophobia. In bolshevism you have a vested right to bite and rob. The symbolists bit, but they did not rob, not ideas at least, which is a pity, for they had none of their own. The deficit is symptomatic. Revolutions are caused not by ideas but by appetites. The symbolists, hungry for chaos, substituted delirium for calm and incoherence for clarity. They are gone, but

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while they were here they were rabid as the Reds. In the Terror, Verlaine took part.

Afterwards I had the signal honor of meeting the poet who at the time had recently been discharged from prison, from a prison rather where he had been put, as he was put in other prisons, for a beautiful error. He currently mistook the time of day for the Renaissance, that epoch when artists were above the law. In those days Charles V stooped and restored a brush which Titian had dropped, remarking as he did so that only by an emperor can an artist be properly served. He was quite right. As it happens, there are no more emperors, but then there are no more Titians, which is not a comfortable adjustment, though, praise God, we still have Verlaine, or at least his verse, reams of which he wrote in jail where

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he had the leisure and the opportunity to admire everything except the façade.

On that point, perhaps humorous, he left a book: *Mes prisons*. In addition, he talked about them. He talked about "his" prisons and "his" charity hospitals unaffectedly, without snobbishness, as a landed proprietor may speak of his estates. One of Verlaine's estates I visited. It was an enclosure, at the back of a shop, in a blind alley, where he had a cot that stood not on the floor, there was no floor, but on the earth. From that tower of ivory he wrote to a friend asking the loan of ninety centimes, which he faithfully promised to repay in two months. Yet which — the unforeseen intervening — he was unable to return so soon.

It was not there, but at the Café François Premier, on the left bank, that I had the extraordinary good fortune of

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being addressed by him. Very shabby, rather dirty, a trifle drunk, he talked delightfully. He talked as only great poets and some madmen can talk. He talked of things beautiful or merely horrible that never happen, that never could happen, but which were real to him. "Cheat yourself and dream," said Epictetus. It was his method, and the proper one for a glory of France who had not where to lay his head.

In the erudite pandemonium that occultism is, Swinburne is said to have been Catullus and Tennyson, Ovid. If that be true, Verlaine may have been Alcæus, but with something added, something indescribably and delicately unique, something that brought him voices that no other poet has heard, voices which came to him in jail, where he had been put, not as Villon was for

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highwayry but, much more innocently, for having shot a brother bard.

On the heights where his repentant spirit roamed, Mallarmé tried to follow. The throne-rooms of the ideal are spacious but the thrones are few. Only the elect may mount to where they glow. Mallarmé fell over backward into the incomprehensibleness of *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, a poem that afterward fell deeper, into the gymnastics of a ballet.

I met Mallarmé at a dinner where he sat next to a gorgeous young American, then known as Madame de Chimay, who wore a string of emeralds as big and as naked as eggs, and who, only a little later, executed a fugue with a fiddler. In so doing she set a fashion that Elvire of Spain and Louise of Belgium immediately adopted, and with

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which Louise of Saxony caught up later on. It was said that they were all insane, but as not one of them ran off with a poet, the diagnosis was perhaps incorrect.

Meanwhile Mallarmé was talking English to this young person. In talking he asked to be appointed shepherd of her smiles. The conceit, very pretty by the way, he afterward put in the last line of a sonnet, the only coherent line that he or any other symbolard ever wrote.

George Moore somewhere said that Mallarmé looked like a refined peasant. To me he rather suggested a scholarly school-teacher. It is small matter. The man now is a ghost. His absurd verse is ghostlier. Other Parnassians whom I have met are ghosts as well. From among them, I ask leave to resummon one and evoke another.

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Before Stuart Merrill definitely deserted Fifth Avenue, he gave a dinner at which George Pellew and several others, your servant included, were present. In the course of it the post-mortem swam up. The usual stupidity that there is nothing in it was not advanced. My fellow guests were too modern. One of them quoted a strophe from the *Gita*: "Never the spirit was born, the spirit shall cease to be never." The Hindu lay is perhaps recon-dite. The Song of the harper going out from Amenti is perhaps even more so. Another man quoted from it: "Life is death in a land of darkness, death is life in a land of light." Then, unobtrusively I hope, but incorrectly I fear, I repeated what Hafiz said of ghostland: "A breath, a wind, a sound, a voice, a tinkle of the camel-bell."

At that, Pellew, who was a poet,

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promised that if he were alive when he was dead, he would come back and say so. The promise seemed a poetic draft on an equally poetic future. But it may be that there is no future. It may be that there is merely a continuous present in which events unroll. Pellew died that night. When going home, he slipped, fell, and broke his skull. Presently he kept his promise. At the time William James was confusing the sceptical, and even the credulous, with the clairaudience of Mrs. Piper. Pellew spoke through that medium. I am not making this up. It is all down in the reports concerning her.

Obviously, as ghosts go, Pellew is very much alive, which is more than I can say of his verse. Yet, in point of time, he belonged to the Victorian era, during which, in this country, in England, and in France, there was a con-

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stant cascade of real song. Today there is no more verse like that. There are no poets now such as those that have gone. In the youth of centuries that is usually the case. Probably, in a generation or two, bards will bloom afresh. Then they too shall pass, and a hundred years hence it will be said that there is no more verse like theirs. But, in default of poets there are their ghosts and, when these are laid, always there will be other poets.

